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Loss of Self in Dissociation in Prostitution; Recovery of Self in Connection to Horses: A Survivor's Journey

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Abstract

This narrative is about dissociation in the lives of women who have been exploited through prostitution. When we speak about prostitution, we do not speak often enough about the dissociation needed for women and girls to survive sexual exploitation. The author challenges the wisdom of governments such as Germany that legalize prostitution, treating it as a “job” and ignoring the violence and subsequent dissociation in women. The author describes her personal journey, explaining how women are traumatized even after the first commercial sex act, which is a sexual assault. They dissociate which makes their lives bearable, but they fail to see its negative effects that continue even after they leave prostitution. Finally, the author relates her personal breakthrough experience to end her dissociation while she was caring for horses. This realization allowed her to identify and connect to her own feelings and to be her authentic self.

Keywords

Germany, prostitution, women, legalization, trauma, dissociation, horse, equine, epiphany, journey, recovery, healing

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LOSS OF SELF IN DISSOCIATION IN PROSTITUTION; RECOVERY OF SELF IN CONNECTION TO HORSES: A SURVIVOR'S JOURNEY

Sandra Norak

Sisters e.V.

ABSTRACT

This narrative is about dissociation in the lives of women who have been exploited through prostitution. When we speak about prostitution, we do not speak often enough about the dissociation needed for women and girls to survive sexual exploitation. The author challenges the wisdom of governments such as Germany that legalize prostitution, treating it as a “job” and ignoring the violence and subsequent dissociation in women. The author describes her personal journey, explaining how women are traumatized even after the first commercial sex act, which is a sexual assault. They dissociate which makes their lives bearable, but they fail to see its negative effects that continue even after they leave prostitution. Finally, the author relates her personal breakthrough experience to end her dissociation while she was caring for horses. This realization allowed her to identify and connect to her own feelings and to be her authentic self.

KEYWORDS

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I WILL DESCRIBE DISSOCIATION WITH PROSTITUTION from my personal experience and also from a general perspective because I think it's very important to talk more about what is going on *in* and what is done *with* a human being who constantly faces sexual abuse in prostitution.

After I exited prostitution in 2014, dissociation followed me and normal life was not possible. By talking about my experience with dissociation I want to make trauma and dissociation more visible. People often don't understand or believe what they cannot see: And dissociation is something you cannot see either when the traumatic situation is taking place or when dissociation is appearing as a trauma consequence. So, it's often not understood, which means that violence in prostitution is not seen as violence when the women don't scream or cry. But it's important that more and more people realize that the worst forms of violence can, with the help of dissociation, be committed in total silence and, therefore, stay invisible for others.

Many of the women I met in prostitution and I did not know what a big part dissociation played in our lives and what dissociation did to us—our personality and our whole identity. It was invisible to us too. So, on the one hand, dissociation

was an important “tool” to survive the daily abuse, on the other hand, it was extremely harmful because it separated us from ourselves unknowingly.

What is dissociation?

Before I go on, there is one point that is very important for me to talk about first: I come from Germany where prostitution is legal and liberal, seen as a job like any other. This view of prostitution supports entering prostitution/trafficking and it, therefore, supports dissociation.



Figure 1: Mirror Image vs. Reality in Prostitution

In Figure 1 you can see that the state (government) says that prostitution is a job, a sexual service. Then you have society (people, media) that say that prostitution is a job, a sexual service. Furthermore, you have the pimps/traffickers/sex buyers who say that prostitution is a job, a sexual service because they profit from exploiting women in prostitution. In the middle, the prostituted woman is looking in the mirror, looking to all those parties and being influenced by their way of speaking about prostitution, especially by the way the state speaks about and handles prostitution because states are generally a role model and provider of orientation, especially for young persons. So many women are looking in the mirror and what they are seeing is: “I have to endure prostitution;” “prostitution will not destroy me;” and “prostitution is just a job, a sexual service.”

But the reality is different. The reality is that a woman cannot endure prostitution; she is not okay, and prostitution is destroying her. Suffering violence weakens the body and soul. Having to suffer violence that isn’t officially recognized as such, as is the case in Germany, weakens the body and soul even more because you convince yourself it couldn’t be so bad and expect yourself to stand things that you cannot stand. And *that is* where dissociation starts to work and *that is* where states that normalize sexual abuse by declaring prostitution a normal job are responsible for the separation process of the prostituted person’s real self. They are responsible for the death of countless souls—mostly those of women and girls.

Considering, for example, that I’ve “served” up to 20 men a day in a German Flat Rate Brothel—every day, seven days a week, for four weeks, one wonders how this is possible, physically as well as psychologically. But this is called a job in

Germany and if the state and the society tell young women and girls that this is a job instead of telling them this is abuse, many of them enter prostitution quickly—mostly through a third person, a pimp/trafficker, often called a loverboy, because they are not warned about the harm and the violence. It's very easy for traffickers in Germany. The loverboy method¹ is increasing.

Most of those who enter prostitution are traumatized after the first sex buyer, because, no matter if money is exchanged—it is unwanted sex. There is no way back to make this experience “unhappen.” It's not like working in a supermarket where you change your job and forget the old one. To most women affected by prostitution, it feels like rape; it is rape and, therefore, they start to dissociate, develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and often cannot escape the ongoing circle of abuse. Entering is very easy, escaping not.

In legal prostitution systems, violence, as such, is not named by the state, often not named by society, and additionally, hidden behind the resulting protection mechanism of dissociation. Also, alcohol and drugs are used to switch off.

So how can they escape a system of violence if violence is made invisible? Mostly they cannot escape under these conditions.

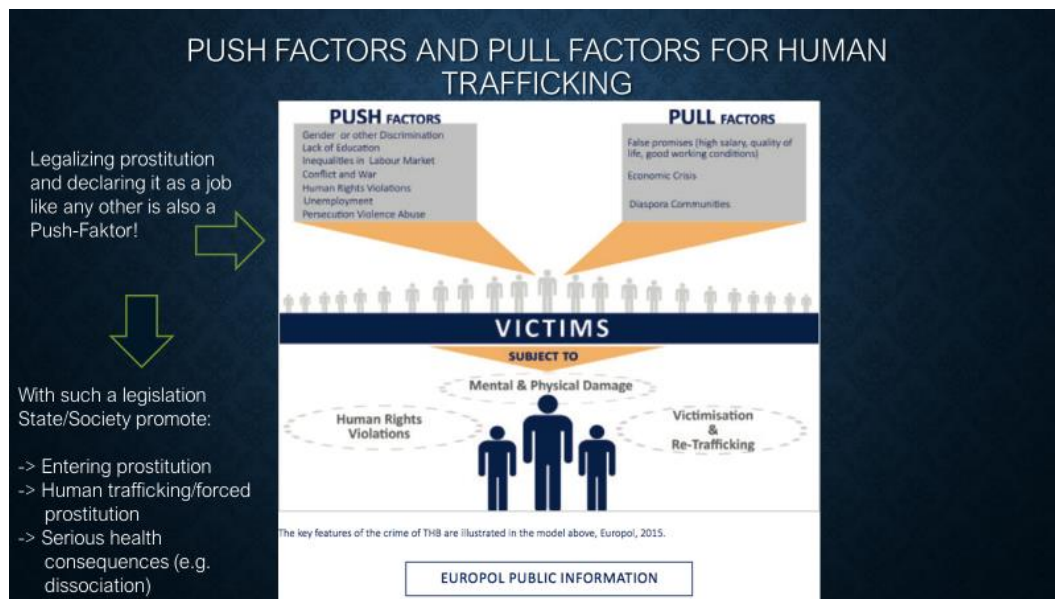


Figure 2: Push Factors and Pull Factors for Prostitution and Human Trafficking

Figure 2 shows that legalizing prostitution and declaring it a job like any other is a “push-factor” for entering prostitution and for trafficking. A state with such legislation is responsible not only for women and girls entering prostitution, especially at a young age, and often becoming victims of trafficking. The state is also

¹ The “loverboy” method is a popular way to recruit and traffic women for prostitution. The man pretends to care of the victim, usually claims to love her, then manipulates her into prostitution.

responsible for the health consequences that result from this, such as a lifetime of trauma and dissociation.

When you enter prostitution, you experience constant sexual abuse, humiliation, and violations of human dignity. Dissociation and other trauma mechanisms start to work although women are often not aware of them. After my exit, I recognized trauma symptoms, although I did not know that they were trauma symptoms. I had problems with breathing every day, I felt dizzy every day, I had heart rhythm disturbances every day and daily panic attacks. I had serious problems talking and listening to others. I had problems concentrating and remembering conversations. I did not feel present and all my senses were dampened, like being permanently in a trance-like state. In summary: I had enormous problems with dissociation. And dissociation did not stop after my exit. It had become automatic.

In prostitution, I never really recognized dissociation as a problem—it was helpful to switch myself off. This explains why, for example, I forgot conversations with sex buyers; I forgot faces. I thought this was normal. If you are not interested in something, you do not listen well and then forget what the other person said.

But this becomes difficult if you spend 12 hours a day with sex buyers and everything hurts, which means you are never really “in the here and now,” because you are constantly wandering far away in your thoughts...for years. Your brain has trained in this mechanism of the “I-go-away-from-this-moment.” It is a survival strategy. Unfortunately, this mechanism does not disappear simply because the abuse is over. It becomes automatic.

After my exit from prostitution, I cared for horses in the mountains. For the first time, I noticed dissociation and how disturbing it was—but then I knew nothing about dissociation and that my problem was dissociation. I did not make the connections.

At one point, I noticed that I could not follow even a short conversation until the end. The more I wanted to live normally in the here and now (because there was no more pain, nothing that hurts anymore, nothing I was afraid of) I realized that I was not able to be in the present, but instead, switched off like when I was being abused.

If someone spoke to me, even for only five minutes, I was immediately elsewhere, no longer in the conversation. As a result, I had no idea what my conversational partner told me, even though I seemed involved in the conversation. Believe me, this is very frightening because you know that something is totally wrong with you, but you don't know what. Now I understand that in prostitution my brain had developed this mechanism. It was helpful to switch myself off in situations that hurt so much that, otherwise, I would not be able to endure them. I switched off the unnecessary, incriminating and disgusting comments and sex acts of the sex buyers.

After exiting prostitution, the problem was that I was still switching myself off while talking to someone. I did not know what was wrong with me. I noticed that I did not know anything about the conversation or just parts of it. But I could not do anything against this switching off mechanism—it was automatic. In addition, I had developed enormous language difficulties. I could not speak without stuttering. The more I perceived this, the more suspicious it became to me. At that time, I had no idea that my brain had developed a mechanism during prostitution with which, after my exit, made me struggle. I was afraid of what was happening. I

seriously thought I was suffering from Alzheimer's disease, because so often I knew nothing about conversations, could not remember, could not concentrate, and I had problems with speaking.

Now I know it was not Alzheimer's—it was dissociation that I could not rid myself of. In prostitution, I had forgotten to be in the here and now. I fled the conversations with sex buyers; I fled during the sexual abuse. This mechanism of “going out of the moment” helped me to endure all this but I could not get rid of it, which made my daily life disastrous.

Longtime dissociation was also responsible for the fact that, in some situations, I felt nothing; I was separate from my feelings. Sometimes men abused me sexually or physically while I felt nothing and was completely empty inside—like my soul was empty. I had lost myself. I had lost the ability to look in the mirror and to see who I really was after all that had happened. I was separated from the “real me.”

Luckily, I met horses. They started to be a mirror for me. They also showed me the extent of my battered soul and they showed me how to begin healing. After exiting prostitution, I began caring for horses in the mountains. Horses, especially two of them that I worked with two to three times a week, taught me the most important lesson in my life. Something that I had never learned in school. It was the lesson of “finding and being yourself.” Working with horses—not riding them—but simply being and interacting with them as equal beings has destroyed this harmful dissociation and given me back access to my feelings and emotions.

When I worked with the horses, I did longeing,² gym exercises, and ground-work to build up their muscles.

How the horses helped me to overcome dissociation is not irrational or magical, but something very natural. Horses are flight animals. They perceive every movement of your body and vibrations. In nature, they need this to survive, to escape when they are in danger. When I was sad and suppressed my sadness, working with the horses did not work: Everything looked stiff and unharmonious. No matter what feelings I suppressed, as soon as I suppressed them, the horses realized that something was wrong. I don't know if they exactly perceive our feelings if we are sad, angry, or nervous, but because of their flight instinct, they know when you outwardly represent something that you are not inside. For example, one is laughing and smiling, while one is deeply sad inside. This contrast of the inner feelings and the outer behavior make horses suspicious because they cannot judge the situation and do not know whether to flee or whether there is no danger.

I had always thought I should not show my fear, my sadness, or my anger when dealing with horses. But what I have learned is completely different—and despite all my training, it was by pure coincidence that I discovered it. I tell you this because it shows the essence of what a survivor of sexual abuse needs to start the healing journey.

From time to time I was working in a large hall with a single horse; alone with the horse, the music, and my memories of the past. On this day I was very sad because my grandma had died. I thought about my life, which seemed (because of

² Longeing is a practice of moving the horse in a wide circle around the handler while it attached to a long line. The goal is to exercise the horse, build strength, and to train the horse.

prostitution, breaking up with school, etc.) like a battlefield. I heard a melancholy song on the radio and was close to tears. The horse was walking beside me. I tried to suppress my sadness because I had to work the horse, doing gym exercises with her and longe her. I couldn't show my feelings; this would be wrong, I thought.

I started to longe her, but I was not really present, not concentrating. I was out of the moment, as my brain had been trained. Nothing worked. The horse did not run as I wanted, did not relax, did not stretch; it was really stubborn. Beside my sadness, I became angry because nothing was working. At some point, the sadness and the anger left me unable to suppress my tears. I stopped in the middle of the hall and threw the longe whip on the floor. I went to the horse; I leaned against the horse, I hugged it and I started crying. I expressed the pain, which I had carried around for years but which I had never shared with anybody.

We both stood there. I was crying—but that meant I was honest and authentic. There was no contrast anymore between my inner feelings and my outer behavior. The horse knew that I was authentic, that I was real, she could now judge me and, therefore, judge the situation. She knew now that there was no danger. The horse stood still and I started to feel a very deep connection because she seemed willing to be and work with me when I was not wearing a mask—the mask I had learned to wear in prostitution where most of the time I had to look and act as if I was happy, although I was dying inside because of the pain.

When I calmed down, I no longer wanted to do longeing or gym exercises with her. I let go of the cavesson.³ I wanted the horse to do whatever she wanted. She should be able to walk, to run, to have fun; to feel free. She should be able to feel exactly the joy I felt in this moment, that she was not only accepting my broken self but asking me to express it, which means she was asking for my real self. I felt freed. Suddenly I was here, there were no hidden feelings anymore and the horse noticed this. Now, not only she, but we both had arrived in the here and now. I learned that to be close to the horse I had to be close to myself.

Never before I had done free-longeing⁴ with her. I started to move through the hall, she followed me closely, paying attention to my movements, my body language. She was not stubborn anymore, and without having practiced it before, I started longeing her in the circle, free, with nothing in my hand. She could have done what she wanted, but she followed me with the help of only the slightest movements of my body. It felt like we were connected. Just with my body language and my mind I was able to accelerate or slow down her speed. She became relaxed and was full of grace, harmonious and so powerful in her expression—beautiful to watch. She was floating through the hall with ease, with the same ease that I felt in the moment. I was here, in the moment, and very happy with that. I was one with the horse, connected to her and I was connected just because I lived and expressed my real self. I was one with a creature that is so different from human beings. This feeling was amazing.

From then on, I understood that I could cry in the presence of the horses, when I was sad, or be angry when I felt anger. I could be anything as long as I expressed it and did not suppress what I felt and the horse could classify me as authentic. In working with horses, I had discovered my real self. I had to be real because the

³ The noseband of a halter or bridle.

⁴ Working with the horse off the long line

horses asked me to be. Only through being authentic, was I able to mentally merge with the horse—and that caused the most beautiful feeling I had ever experienced. To be one, infinite freedom with simultaneous love and liveliness, acceptance in the now by the person that you really are, which results in learning to accept and to love yourself as you are, with your story, with your experience, with your past.

It was this incredibly wonderful moment of being together that was so intense because all was *real*. Horses showed me that it can be wonderful to live a moment together. They have created many moments in which I did not want to flee, in which I was not afraid—but in which I felt the deepest happiness and the highest level of inner peace and connectedness. They taught me to be authentic, to show and allow feelings and, therefore, being accepted.

Through horses I have learned to stay in the moment, to not constantly switch off and, therefore, to reconnect with my emotions and feelings. At some point, I was able to transfer this “staying in the moment” while working with horses to “staying in the moment” while being with humans. It was transformative. Since then, it has been better and better. Today I have no more problems with dissociation because I now live as authentically as I can.

To conclude, how can one help victims of sexual abuse to overcome trauma-related dissociation?

I am not a doctor, not a psychologist, nor a health expert. From my experience, if you want to heal a victim of sexual abuse you have to concentrate on their self. Victims of prostitution and trafficking have often lost that connection to themselves and to their feelings. They were taught early to suppress their real feelings, which means they have to wear a mask. Only with this mask were they able to survive—with this mask they could hide their pain, hide their tears, hide their screams, and their hopelessness. Wearing a mask, not showing your feelings and not being yourself in prostitution and losing yourself, is the only way to survive.

When healing trauma it is not enough to medicate and to control the trauma symptoms such as panic attacks and flashbacks. The real task is to do, in a human interaction, what horses did with me in their language—finding ways to help the victims discover who they really are deep inside, to reconnect to their selves by allowing and asking them to be real. I promise you; it is not always easy because you might see so much pain and destruction as a result of the abuse. It needs training and a strong personality to deal with this but if you are engaged in helping victims of sexual abuse, it is worth it.

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Sandra Norak (a pseudonym) spent six years in prostitution. Currently, she is about to finish law studies in Germany with a specialty in European and Public International law with a focus on international criminal law and international protection of human rights. She has written about the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and sexual violence in armed conflict. She works to raise awareness about the system of

prostitution and different forms of human trafficking, like the "loverboy-method." She is also doing prevention work in schools to teach young girls how to identify and protect themselves and friends from "loverboys." She has spoken in the parliaments in Germany and Italy about prostitution, trafficking, and especially about "hidden" trafficking. She has made many appearances in newspapers and on TV. She is part of Sisters e.V., a German NGO, that is doing enlightenment work about prostitution and offering exit services for women in prostitution. Her homepage is: <https://mylifeinprostitution.wordpress.com/>

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